Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 16 Number 9 September 2019

**FIELD TRIP: Sunday, 15th September 2019: Mrugavani National Park, Chilkur. Meeting point: Mangatrai Pearls, Punjagutta, 6.00AM. Trip Coordinator: Bharadwaj Korni (Mobile: 9949095660)**

Spread over 850 acres, Mrugavani National Park falls in Moinabad Mandal, Ranga Reddy District, and is home to a wide array of animals, birds and butterflies and boasts of a rich avifauna. This would be a half-day trip. Carry water, breakfast and rain gear.

**INDOOR MEETING: Talk on "Snake People" by Avinash Visvanathan, General Secretary, Friends of Snakes Society. Tuesday, 17th September 2019, 6.00PM: Goethe-zentrum Hyderabad, 20 Journalist's Colony, Road No. 3, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500034.** (For directions, please contact 94905-09251 or 040-65526443/23350040)

Snakes are amongst the most fascinating and least popular creatures in the world. A lot of people are unaware that snakes are shy creatures that usually prefer to retreat when encountered, and will become defensive only when threatened. When left alone snakes present little or no danger to people.

Avinash has been working with snakes and in wildlife conservation for the past 15 years. His areas of interest are spatial distribution and natural history documentation of reptiles, with a special focus on snakes, snake bite mitigation and captive management. Avinash's talk will focus on human and snake interaction and snake bite mitigation, and he will also bust some unfounded myths and underline the vital role of snakes in keeping our natural ecosystem working.

**ANNUAL DAY DINNER: Saturday, 28th September 2019, 6.00PM: Guruswamy Centre, Northstar AMG Plaza, 4th Floor, Nehru Nagar Colony, West Marredpally, Secunderabad, Telangana 500026.**

Our Chief Guest this year is Kalyan Varma, wildlife photographer, filmmaker, naturalist and explorer. He freelances with many of the world's leading magazines, environmental NGOs and television channels like National Geographic and BBC. Kalyan has worked on several nature documentaries, amongst which is the recent film 'Wild Karnataka'.

Register for the Dinner by paying Rs 650/- by cash/cheque/ online transfer. Cheques (favouring Deccan Birders) and cash can be handed over to Surekha (mobile: 9949038532); online transfer can be done as per following details:

Account Name: Deccan Birders
Account Number: 1181101007629
Bank: Canara Bank, Banjara Hills Branch
IFSC Code: CNRB0001181.

In case of online transfer, please send a mail to treasurer.deccanbirders@gmail.com with online transfer details for a confirmation/acknowledgement of the payment.

## WATERING THE BIRDS IN THE GARDEN

Text and Photos: Sita Susarla

The scorching summers of Delhi make birds and birders alike stay in the comfort of their homes. As it is also breeding season for many of our birds, we found the birds in our garden hovering around the water taps and shady trees supplying water to their young ones. To try and help them out, we placed a few bowls of clean water under the bamboo bush and the Pilkhan (*Ficus virens*) tree, and also left the tap beneath slightly open so that water would trickle down and keep the mud cool. We also took care to ensure that the water levels in the bowls were maintained at one fourth of the container for small birds to bathe and at half levels for the use of bigger birds.

**Birds cooling off near the tap**

As the mercury levels rose, the number of birds visiting the water containers increased tremendously and the Pilkhan tree and the adjacent bamboo bush became the preferred perching spot for many a bird. We had fifty species of birds sipping water and resting in this corner of the garden. Most of these birds were seen puffing and panting with their mouths open, exhaling heat from their bodies. On hotter days we had to refill the water two to three times daily as they would run dry within hours of filling up. The happiest time for the birds, however, would be when the gardener would go watering the plants.

**Asian Koel pair**

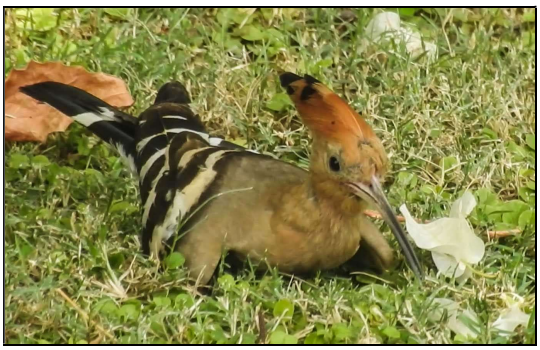
**Asian Koel (female) threatening Jungle Babblers**

Here are some observations that we made over a period of three months beginning from the month of May. At Around 11.00AM and 3.00PM, there would be a large gathering of birds either drinking or bathing in the water, or taking mud baths in the wet mud around the water taps. A pair of crows kept chasing away the White-breasted Waterhen, Greater Coucal and the Koels but not the smaller birds like Bulbuls, Oriental White-eyes and Barbets. This may be because these birds drank a lot of water spending a whole five minutes doing so. The crows would chase away the Indian Thick-knee too that would come at dusk. The Indian Thick-knee surprisingly spent fifteen to twenty minutes drinking water.

**Indian Thick-knee**

On some days the spotted owlet too would drop in around 4.00PM and spend a good amount of time drinking water; somehow, the crows did not bother the Owlet. After a few days when it became hotter the crows were attacked ferociously by these birds to get to the water. It was amazing to see the Thick-knee arriving well before dusk for a sip and chasing the crows. Among the smaller birds the Starlings would drive away most of the birds. The Brahminy Starlings would raise their loose crest and hold them straight up in a threatening manner. The Brown-headed Barbet, however, was oblivious to all these threats as it quenched its thirst. The sociable White-eyes seemed to be not bothered by any bullies, either, as they were very quick in their movements; also, their bowl of water was the smallest and only one-fourth full.

**Laughing Dove**



**Eurasian Hoopoe taking a mud bath**

It was a pleasure watching the White-eyes bathe in twos and threes; sometimes even six to seven birds would enjoy the cool bath. The Jungle Babblers, Eurasian Hoopoe, Laughing Doves and Collared Doves tucked themselves well into the wet mud all through afternoon. So did the Grey Francolins. The White-throated Kingfisher would only take a mouthful of water before it swooped back to its perch, all in two seconds.

**Red-wattled Lapwing**

The Red-wattled Lapwing was seen carrying water in its belly feathers to its new born chicks.

**Black Kite**

There was a pair of Black Kites that would often come for water. As this disturbed the other birds, we placed a big bowl of water in the open, far away from the bamboo bush. This helped a lot, as birds like Parakeets, Doves and Pigeons preferred the open area.

**Water War – Jacobin Cuckoo with Brahminy Starling**

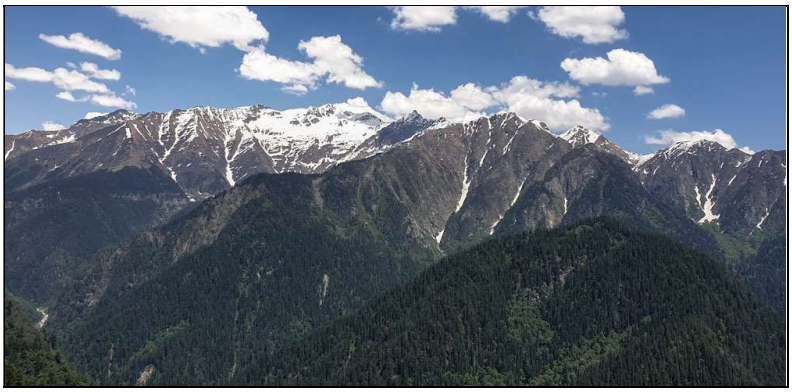
In the month of July came the Jacobin Cuckoo, known to be the harbinger of the monsoon. It is a pretty bird but most ferocious at the water gate. From the comfort of home, we shot some great pictures and videos of these birds and their activities, and were as satisfied as we would have been, had we spotted some new species of birds.

* * *

## A PERFECT SUMMER GETAWAY

## Trip Report: Tirthan Valley/Great Himalayan National Park, May 2019

Text and Photos: Prabhu Patruni



**A view of Tirthan Valley**

We were looking for a perfect getaway this summer and in came the signal from my friend who runs an adventure trekking company. He suggested that we go to Tirthan Valley in Kullu district, a three-day camping at 3000 metres. Sounded interesting. The question popped up in my mind: Do I get to sight birds? And the answer? Oh yes! – since the camp is inside the Great Himalayan National Park, declared a heritage site by UNESCO in 2014, and home to about 180 bird species.

**Tirthan Valley – Nature preserved.** Situated at 1600m above sea level in the Kullu district, the place gets its name from the Tirthan river, which is considered holy among the locals, and gradually merges into the Beas river which today is the source of some of the largest hydel power projects in India. It is a place with a vast variety flora and fauna, V-shaped valleys and snow-capped mountains, making it one of the finest adventure destinations in the Himalayan region.

**Rolla Camp**

**A view during the trek**

**Great Himalayan National Park Rolla camp/Shilt trek**
Spread over 1100+ sq km, this National Park is a rich bio-diverse environment, which is home to many endangered species like Western Tragopan (the state bird of Himachal Pradesh), Snow Leopard etc. Situated at 2000m is the Rolla camp site, a base camp to further treks which go up to 6000m. Shilt was our next halt situated at 3000m, with moderate to steep ascent. Covering 1000m through a trek of 5 km through thick vegetation and not much of a trail made it an exciting and strenuous journey.

**Birding at GHNP:** During my chat with our guide, I came to know that this park has been identified by BirdLife International as an Important Bird Area in the western Himalayan region. Birds sighted commonly are Redstarts, Wren Babblers, Laughingthrushes, Whistling Thrushes, Blue Magpies, Long-tailed Minivets, Yellow-bellied Fantails, Little Forktail, Rufous-breasted Accentor etc. I am sharing some of the bird sightings below:

**Plumbeous Water Redstart**: both Male and Female. It belongs to the Flycatcher family and mostly lives near streams.

**Plumbeous Water Redstart Male**

**Plumbeous Water Redstart Female**

**Blue Whistling Thrush:** It is known for its whistling sounds, usually at the dawn and dusk times, and feeds on life available on marshy lands.

**Blue Whistling Thrush**

**Brown Dipper:** It is found near fast moving river streams, and its behaviour is characterized by its frequent dipping in the waters. It is an aquatic songbird.

**Brown Dipper**

**Scaly-breasted Wren Babbler:** It is a tiny tailless terrestrial bird, which is mostly found in damp thick growth regions near to water bodies. It feeds mainly on insects and seeds, and is mostly found in the Himalayan region.

**Scaly-breasted Wren Babbler**

**Yellow-billed Blue Magpie:** It is usually found in high elevations. It has a distinctive long beautiful tail. These birds usually travel in groups and stick to a place where they continue to stay. They usually feed on insects and the eggs of other birds. They have a harsh call.

**Yellow-billed Blue Magpie**

**Little Forktail**: It is a difficult-to-spot bird due to its tiny build and fast moving actions.

**Little Forktail**

* * *

## Trip Report: Umamaheshwaram, July 14, 2019

Text: Ambika Pradhan; Photos: Raghu SR

**The trail**

Umamaheshwaram, and the surrounding wilderness, have always been my personal favourite birding location. Ever since Srikanth introduced me to the location way back in the summer of 2016, this place has constantly sprung up lifer surprises for me. This is the place where friendships were forged, memories were made, and legends were passed down to me.

On many instances, we'd drive up to Umamaheshwaram in the night in pursuit of the beauty that the Spot-bellied Eagle Owl is. Such nights are when I'd fantasize finally spotting the owl that all my other birding peers would upload photos of. But, alas, I never could spot it! But the aura and the unknown energy of the place always kept me enchanted, wanting more. Once, Humayun Bhai, with whom birding is always a way to gain a deep understanding about the history of the place, reminisced on how a decade ago Tigers and Leopards would frequent the stream next to the temple in the night. Ever since, I've been smitten by fantasies of coming across the big cat. Every time we'd go birding in the night, I'd imagine a Tiger watching me, tracking every movement. The feeling of being watched by a creature larger than life, larger than any human purpose has a spiritual connection with me. Something I regard highly and other-worldly.

**White-rumped Shama**

So, when Deccan Birders announced a trip to a location so special to me, I couldn't pass up the opportunity. On the second Sunday of July, when Sudhir organised the trip to Umamaheshwaram, I saw it as an opportunity to unwind from the pressures of the job (read 'adult world'). And hence we started early, and as a bonus, I also had a little reunion with my teachers from the school and my literature professor from college who joined us for birding.

It was an overcast Sunday morning devoid of any activity. We drove up to the hill, where we would usually bird. I walked a little further from the temple, looking forward to seeing all the species I'd usually spot. But to my horror, there weren't any, at all! Instead, all the birds were replaced by metal sheets of permanent shelters and benches and many other new constructions that have mushroomed around the temple.

**The permanent shelters act as obstructions to bird activity**

Over the years, I have noticed the crowd coming to Umamaheshwaram gradually increase. But this new development is only set to increase the crowd there, hence posing a grave threat to the bird and wildlife population there, especially the vulnerable Yellow-throated Bulbul.

**Yellow-throated Bulbul**

Looking down to the vegetation from the railing, I noticed nothing but trash strewn around. Human waste, discarded hair, plastic covers, you name it. Although we managed to spot one shy Painted Spurfowl, much to our relief, it was foraging in the trash by the railings. It was a really sad day as not even the Brown-headed Barbet, whose call reverberates constantly through the forest, seemed to have fallen silent.

**Changeable Hawk Eagle**

In hopes of finding at least a few more species, we trekked up to the top of the hill. But that route too was met with disappointment as the path was full of human faeces and an unbearable stench. Somehow, we made it to the top and then, finally, I spotted the first raptor of the day! Rising up from the other side of the hill, a Crested Goshawk briefly hovered right in front of us, before disappearing into the other side of the woods.

**Oriental Honey Buzzard**

Even through all the despair about the anthropogenic disturbance, Umamaheshwaram still threw up lifer surprises for me. After nearly 20 minutes of standing on the hilltop, taking in the view from up there and waiting a little more for the Goshawk, we finally made our way back to the car and off to the city. All I was left with was with the hope that Umamaheshwaram would be restored to its former glory someday and that the wildlife would find its way back here.

List of birds seen during the trip:

| Sl. No. | Species Name | Sl. No. | Species Name | Sl. No. | Species Name |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Large Grey Babbler | 16 | Spotted Dove | 31 | Black-hooded Oriole |
| 2 | Crested Goshawk | 17 | Black Drongo | 32 | Painted Spurfowl |
| 3 | Black-headed (aka Tricoloured) Munia | 18 | White-bellied Drongo | 33 | Plain Prinia |
| 4 | Brown-headed Barbet | 19 | Little Egret | 34 | Indian Robin |
| 5 | Coppersmith Barbet | 20 | Oriental Honey Buzzard | 35 | White-rumped Shama |
| 6 | Green Bee-eater | 21 | Black-headed Ibis (en route) | 36 | Brahminy Starling |
| 7 | Red-vented Bulbul | 22 | Red-naped Ibis (en route) | 37 | Loten's Sunbird |
| 8 | White-browed Bulbul | 23 | Tickell's Blue Flycatcher | 38 | Purple Sunbird |
| 9 | Yellow-throated Bulbul | 24 | Grey Francolin | 39 | Purple-rumped Sunbird |
| 10 | Pied Bushchat | 25 | White-breasted Waterhen | 40 | Asian Palm Swift |
| 11 | Southern Coucal | 26 | Common Iora | 41 | Little Swift |
| 12 | House Crow | 27 | White-throated Kingfisher | 42 | Alpine Swift |
| 13 | Asian Koel | 28 | Indian Grey Hornbill | 43 | Red-rumped Swallow |
| 14 | Eurasian Collared Dove | 29 | Dusky Crag Martin | | |
| 15 | Laughing Dove | 30 | Common Myna | | |

Some other photos taken during the trip:

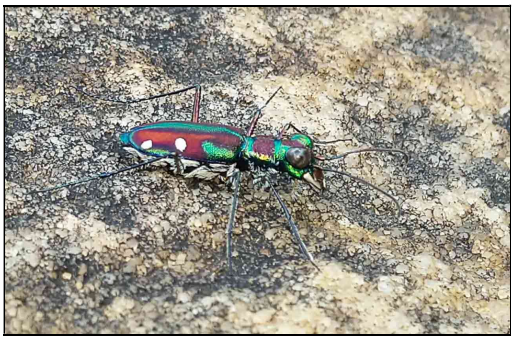
**Red-vented Bulbul**

**White-bellied Drongo**

**Purple-rumped Sunbird (female)**

**Millipede (*Julus* sp.)**

**Domino Cockroach (*Therea petiveriana*)**

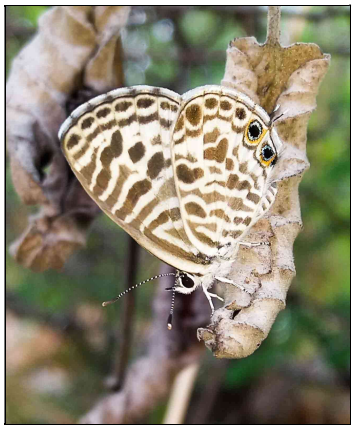


**Tiger Beetle (*Cicindelinae* sp.)**

**Indian Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa indica*)**

**Lemon Pansy**

**Red-vented Bulbul pair wandering around among the dried-up climbers**



**Zebra Blue**

**Common Gull (Cepora nerissa), Two-spot Grass Yellow and other butterflies mud-puddling**

**Rhesus Macaque (*Macaca mullata*)**

* * *

## Who Am I?

### (Part-3)

Srikanth Bhamidipati

1. This bird is sometimes called the king of birds, with divine or royal alignment in mythology. In ancient Near East and Iran they depict the sun with wings, a sign that the bird was linked to the Sun god. It was also a symbol of Jupiter, the supreme Roman deity, and a sign of strength and courage.

2. With white feathers and graceful appearance, these birds often serve as symbols of purity and feminine beauty. Both Celtic and Norse mythology include tales of women who turned into these birds.

3. It is said that seeing this bird and worshipping 'Prosopis cineraria' (Shami tree) on a festival day can bring prosperity and luck to your life. It is a belief that in Ramayana, Lord Rama had killed Ravana after seeing this bird.

4. Whenever Lord Indra, lord of the heavens, transformed himself into another form, he is believed to have become this bird. This bird, named Paravani, is sometimes associated with Goddess Saraswati as a vehicle. The Mori clan of the Bhil tribe of Central India worships this bird as a totem.

5. This bird is sacred to the Lepchas who are the original inhabitants of Sikkim.

**Please choose your answers from the following options:**

- Prinia
- Munia
- Peacock
- Sparrow
- Swan
- Roller
- Crow
- Sunbird
- Blood Pheasant
- Eagle

Please send your answers **by email** to umeshmani1@gmail.com on or before October 10, 2019. Members who give all correct answers will be acknowledged in the next issue of the Pitta.

**Answers to Part-2:**

1. Hornbill
2. Cuckoo
3. Baya Weaver
4. Dove
5. Crane

**Members who responded to Part-2 :** Responses were received from Rama Sarvani and Jayasurya Pathapati, both of whom got 3 answers right. Thank you for your participation!

* * *

# Report: Waterhole Survey, May 2019

The Telangana Forest Department had carried out a Waterhole Survey during the month of May 2019, in which several of our members had also participated and made significant contributions. We give below reports from two different teams that took part in the exercise.

## Amrabad Tiger Reserve

Text and Photos: Anuraag Jonnalagadda

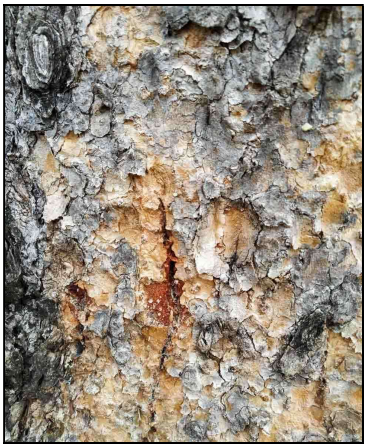
**One of the waterholes covered during the survey**

The Telangana Forest Department has been organizing a waterhole survey in summer since the past two years. The idea of the waterhole survey is to get an estimate of the number and the type of animals that flock to the waterholes (which are very few in number in the summer), thereby getting an understanding of species density and diversity in different areas of the parks. This is often followed by a camera trapping exercise at select locations to get more concrete evidence of tigers, leopards and other such threatened megafauna. The Forest Department invites volunteers for this exercise mainly to ensure that there are no errors, accidental or otherwise, in the data collection process, and they get a fair assessment of the faunal presence in that area. This also enables the volunteers to understand how the Forest Department functions and the on-field difficulties that they have to face on a daily basis.

This year, the waterhole census was conducted on May 11 and 12. Volunteers were asked to report at Aranya Bhavan at 6 am on May 11. Volunteers were already divided into separate batches to cover all tiger reserves in the state – Amrabad, Kawal and Eturnagaram. We, along with about 40 others, hopped onto the bus to Amrabad Tiger Reserve. The journey was hot and uneventful and soon enough, we reached the Forest Department office at Mannanur, where we were joined by others who came by their own transport. In all, it was close to 60 volunteers for Amrabad Tiger Reserve.

After a briefing session by the Forest Department officials, we were divided into groups and assigned to different ranges. The area I was assigned to was Vatavarlapally beat in Dommalapenta range, about 20km ahead of Mannanur towards Srisailam. We were supposed to do the survey on two trails, one in the evening and the other the next morning. Our evening trail was supposed to start at 3:30 which we were a bit worried about, given the scorching heat. But less than 20 minutes after lunch, grey clouds came out of nowhere and it soon started pouring. And since none of us were prepared, we were completely drenched by the time we came back in the evening.

The waterhole that I went to, turned out to be a very small pool, filled with rotting mangoes, courtesy of a very large mango tree overhead and the water seemed completely undrinkable. This was basically a small section of a dried up stream where there was still some water left. While I was wondering how the animals managed to survive on this water, the forest guide, who was a Chenchu himself, said that there was a Chenchu hamlet about a kilometer away and this was their primary source of water. Though I always knew how tough tribal lifestyles could be, this was something which I found very hard to digest. While many of us may blame tribals for forest degradation and decreasing animal numbers, we very rarely appreciate the kind of dangerous, vulnerable life that they are still leading in the wild, something we can never even imagine doing.

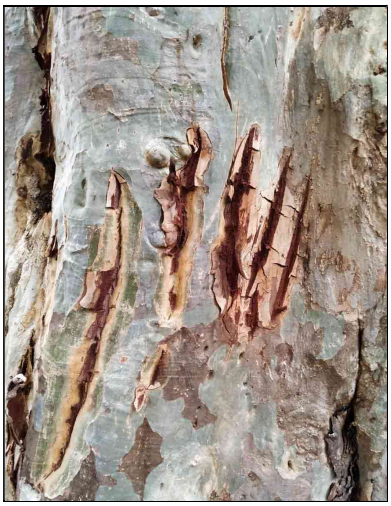


**Tiger scratch marks**

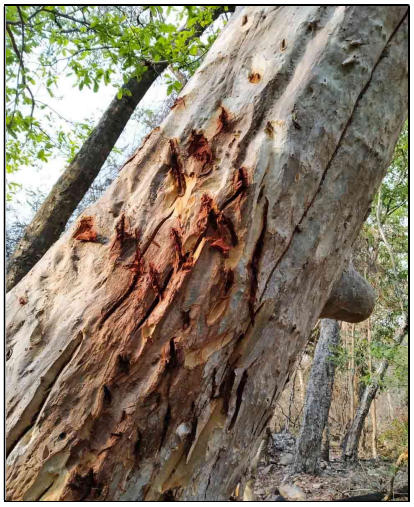
Due to the rain, animal pugmarks that might have been present near the waterhole were washed out and we got no fresh carnivore signs. We did however see Tiger and Leopard scratch marks on different trees and 2 dead Sambhar skeletons, supposedly killed by a tiger more than a month back. Along the trail, there was plenty of Sloth Bear evidence, mainly in the form of scat and occasional scratch marks. There were traces of Tiger, Leopard and Dhole scat as well, but more than 2-3 weeks old.

**Sloth Bear scat**

Herbivore presence was surprisingly low, there were no direct sightings and hardly any scat on the trail. The only animals we saw were a couple of Hares and 2 Giant Squirrels near the waterhole. Thanks to the rain, bird count was also very low, with the major bird sightings being Indian Grey Hornbill, Rufous Treepie, White-bellied Drongo and Black-hooded Oriole. My trail was about 4.5km one way, and due to the breaks that we had taken to avoid the rain, by the time we came back it was already dark. Having heard a lot of stories of Sloth Bear attacks, and having seen enough evidence of their presence, I was thankful that we were able to reach the Beat Office safe and sound.



**Sloth Bear scratch marks**



**Sloth Bear scratch marks**

Our accommodation was right on the Srisailam highway at a popular break point where there were plenty of roadside shops catering to the tourists. As a result, the forest patch upto a 100m away from the road was completely littered with plastic waste. And, as we witnessed that night, a large number of Spotted Deer come to this section every night to feast on all the food that is thrown inside those plastic wrappings.

Despite all warnings, and the provision of a good number of dustbins along the highway, tourists are still managing to completely trash the forest. This negligence can be quite costly and it is a possibility that many of those Deer may be ingesting good amounts of plastic every day.

**Indian Star Tortoise**

## Eturnagaram Tiger Reserve

Text and Photos: Raghu Sravan Kumar R & K Sudhir Moorti

Having missed out earlier on the mail confirmation of my participation in the Waterhole Survey, to be carried out on May 11-12, 2019, it was literally at the last minute that I realized that I had a ton of things to do to get ready for the same!

A hectic few hours later, after 2½ hours of sleep, I reached Aranya Bhavan at 5.50AM, where the volunteers participating from different organizations were teaming up. Mr. Shankaran, OSD, addressed the participants about the survey, explaining how it helps to frame the management plan in ensuring adequate water supply for the wild animals and thus help in wildlife conservation.

Initially, I was included in the team for Amrabad Tiger Reserve, which I had already been to several times, so I requested the officials for a shift to the Eturnagaram team, so that I could explore a new place. All set, we started from Aranya Bhavan at 7.40AM and, after a break of 45 minutes at Hanamkonda Divisional Forest Office, we reached Divisional Forest Office, Tadvai at 2.30PM. We were well received by rain at the entry of Eturnagaram borders.

Mr Khader Mohiuddin, ACF, in the presence of Mr Akbar, CCF Warangal, Mr Ramalingam, DFO (Urban) Warangal, and Mr Pradeep Kumar Shetty, DFO Bhupalpally, gave a brief introduction about the area and program theme and flagged off the teams involved in the study.

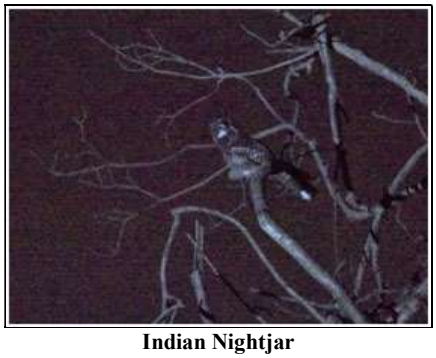
Our team was led by Mr Ch. Srinivas Rao, FRO Lingala Range and Mr Padma Rao, FSO. We headed towards Lingala Range, core zone for the Eturnagaram Wildlife Sanctuary. While en route, we were charged up by the sighting of Gaur at one location; team members also had a few bird sightings - Spotted Dove, Common Myna, Brahminy Starling, Rufous Treepie, House Sparrow taking a dust bath, and Indian Robin.

**Observing the footprints of animals at Lingala Percolation Tank and natural stream**

Reaching the nursery at Lingala Range, as a token of commemoration, the team members planted a tree at the nursery. The light was already failing so, as per the work plan, we decided to do a twilight/nocturnal survey (a trail of around 3km through the forest. Beginning the trail, we heard the call of a Black Drongo and found it along with a Racket-tailed Drongo.

**Greater Racket-tailed Drongo**

All along the trail, we were accompanied by the calls of the Common Hawk Cuckoo, Indian Nightjar and Indian Cuckoo. It was hard to sight and count their numbers.



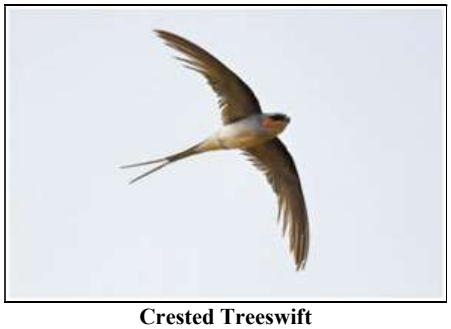
**Indian Nightjar**

One of our teammates rued missing a chance for star trail, as the sky was full of cloud cover. The trail had led us to a waterbody where we found hoof marks of Spotted Deer and Cattle on the wet soil at the bank. A little further, a Black-naped Hare popped into sight.

**Indian Nightjar**

**Black-naped Hare**

The trail ended with a return to the road, from where we reached Lingala base camp in vehicles, where the other teammates had been reminiscing about the day, and personal stories of the past, and had a delightful dinner prepared on firewood for us. The base camp area had no power supply as the transformer had gone bust due to the rain, and a leaking roof made it difficult for us to stay at the base camp. Alternate accommodation was arranged at Lingala village; everyone was reminded of their childhood vacations where we would sleep on the rooftop under the open skies.



**Crested Treeswift**

**Day 2: 12th May 2019**

The day started at 4.00AM. The first team (Team-A) started off by 5.15AM and reached the location, Pochapur village of Lingala range, by 5.40AM. We walked a trail of almost 13km till we reached Vaddugudem by 12.20PM. The trail passed through a Sal forest in the foothills at Durgagutta; at a few places, with the saline soil in the non-perennial gullies, the new tender green foliage added by *Hardwickia binate* trees was delightful.

On the trail, the first live water source we came across was a natural spring, where the wet soft soil had footprints of Spotted Deer (*Axis axis*). While we walked along the length of the stream to observe any other footprints, Mr Srinivasa Rao, FRO, and his staff recorded details, cleared leaf litter and built a bund for water to accumulate at places along the stream.

At one particular spot, I was fascinated with the slope of the terrain where the water would run down the slope to form a gully between rocky slabs. Observing me going off the trail, Mr Rao too joined me, and we found a big burrow under the rock, with the freshly dug out soil from the burrow covering the footprints. Mr Rao called one of his staff members and asked him to arrange a camera trap to track the animal using it.

**Black-hooded Oriole**

In the core part of the trail, the bird life recorded was Plum-headed Parakeet, Black-hooded Oriole, Red-vented Bulbul, Brown-headed Barbet, Rufous Treepie, Golden-fronted Leafbird, Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, Yellow-crowned Woodpecker, Oriental Magpie Robin, Small Minivet, Oriental White-eye, and a pair of Crested Hawk Eagles seen perching on the tree tops.

**Crested Hawk Eagle**

Moving ahead we reached a rivulet, Dayyala Wagu, in which even after a walk for approx. of 400m, we found not one ditch with water to trace, but we did find a Crested Serpent Eagle perching on a tree at the banks.

**Crested Serpent Eagle**

**Dried-up rocky bed in the rivulet Dayyala Wagu**

Scat samples on the trail clearly showed the presence of Chowsingha, Spotted Deer, Gaur, Civet Cat and Sloth Bears around the area. A 500m walk from the rivulet took us to a percolation tank, the Sammaka Saralamma Percolation Tank (SSPT). At a bund across the gully, we found the hoof marks of ungulates at the inner edge of the tank which had very shallow water in it. A further walk of 1.6km from SSPT took us to the Bison Percolation Tank (BPT), which was built by raising a rock-strewn bund across the stream between the two hill slopes for a depth of 3-4m of water storage capacity.

**Sammaka Saralamma Percolation Tank**

**Bison Percolation Tank**

By the time we reached BPT everyone was out of water in their bottles. Fortunately, a good shower started, so we took a break while waiting for the rain to stop. We had thoughts of harvesting the rainwater by spreading ponchos and thus refilling the bottles. Meanwhile a pair of Greater Racket-tailed Drongos were flying in the nearby trees and making calls at different frequencies.

**Stream originating from the natural spring**

Mr Yadgiri, Forest Watcher, appeared with a bottle filled with water and, on questioning, pointed us towards a natural spring nearby. Everyone in the team got rehydrated, refilled all our bottles from the spring, and started walking back to the road. Soon after crossing the tank, we came across a stream and the wet bund has a footprint identified to be that of a Sloth Bear. A 2km walk from there and we reached the road.

**Black-shouldered Kite**

Soon we arrived at Forest Department Office at Tadvai, where we shared our observations with the gathering and also documented the same on a feedback form which we submitted to the Department.

**Conclusion:**

1. The forest terrain was observed to be a homogenous habitat, preferred by only a group of species, as was evident from the bird life too; all along the track the same species of birds were recorded (and in good numbers).
2. During summer it was mainly the natural springs that were serving the wildlife in quenching their thirst. Hence, explorations in identification and monitoring of natural water springs should be continued regularly.
3. The identified natural water springs, and any new ones in future, can be helpful in propagation of plant species, such that the area can become a pocket of heterogenous habitat which can favor the growth of Biodiversity.
4. All through the 13km trail, we did not come across a single saucer/waterhole facility. Efforts have been put in by the Forest Department in restoring and providing water for wildlife in the core forest areas, but still more efforts are needed.
5. The regular track we walked covered a very narrow field width; for better observations in the whole block, more manpower is needed for successful monitoring and management.
6. Although the big cats or other carnivores are not seen in this Range, the Department should try to put a check on cattle grazing in the core area of the forest, to avoid human-wildlife conflicts while sharing the available resources.
7. Not only the higher vertebrates, but other small vertebrates (mammals, birds, reptiles) and arthropods/insects should also be considered for monitoring and conservation, as they too play role in the survival and flourishing of the forest.

* * *

## Bird Humour

Umesh Mani

**Cartoon courtesy: Rob Lang, underdonecomics.com**
(Reprinted with permission)

* * *

**OBITUARY**

It is with great regret that we inform of the demise of our Life Member, Major Ahmed Abdul Aziz. Major Aziz was a nephew of Nawab Din Yar Jung. He joined the Hyderabad State Army in 1947, and was stationed in Hyderabad. Later he went to work for the Sarf-e-Khas (the private security of Nizam Osman Ali Khan). Following his retirement, he took to conservation and was one of the early members of the erstwhile Birdwatchers Society of Andhra Pradesh (now Deccan Birders).

Aziz *sahab*, as he was better known, was full of wit, humour and high spirits. An enthusiastic observer, he enjoyed being out in natural surroundings. Like many of his contemporaries, he started out in the study of natural history through the sights of a rifle and often used to recount his adventures and stories from his *shikar* trips. Though not in any sense of the term a big-game hunter, he had some decent records to his credit. From *shikari* to conservationist is a short step and he bridged that gap effortlessly and was made an Honorary Wildlife Warden for the erstwhile undivided state of Andhra Pradesh. He served on the Advisory Committee of the Nehru Zoological Park and was also elected as a Vice-President of the then-fledgling Birdwatchers Society of Andhra Pradesh.

Aziz *sahab* was also an amateur philatelist and has exhibited his collection of stamps (with the theme being "Animals") in regional and national philatelic exhibitions. He entered into this hobby just as keenly as he did everything else.

In his passing away, at the age of 94, the society has lost one of its oldest surviving members.

## Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

# Cotton Pygmy-goose (*Nettapus coromandelianus*)

**Cotton Pygmy-goose** (Hyderabad, January 10, 2019)

Order: Anseriformes
Family: Anatidae
Genus: *Nettapus*
Species: *N. coromandelianus*
Size: 26-37 cm

Description & distribution: The Cotton Pygmy-goose, also known as Cotton Teal or White-quilled Pgymy-goose, is a perching duck, and among the smallest waterfowl in the world. The male has a dark brown forehead and crown on a whitish head, red irises, a goose-like short black bill deep at the base, a white neck with a broad blackish green collar at the base, and dirty white, irregularly-streaked underparts. Legs are black, but turn greenish in breeding males. The upperparts – back, wing coverts and scapulars – are dark brown with a green-and-purple gloss. In the female, the cap is duller, the neck collar is replaced by spots, neck is finely vermiculated, face is flecked and there is a brown line through the eye. In non-breeding plumage, the male is similar to the female except for the face that the white wing-band is broader. In flight, dark wings and white flight feathers with black tips are visible in the male; the female shows dark wings with a narrower white trailing edge to the secondaries (and some primaries). Chicks are downy, and have marked white superciliary stripes meeting at the back of the dark head. Face is whitish with a dark eye-stripe, and they have a dark grey-to-black tail, buff underparts, a greyish neck, grey-brown mantle and two white patches on the scapulars.

It is widely distributed across most of Asia (including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka), east up to New Guinea, with the nominate race being seen; distribution also extends into parts of Australia, where the sub-species *N. c. albipennis* is seen. Populations are known to move in response to seasonal variations like rain or drought/water scarcity; they also disperse widely in winter, as far west as Jordan and other parts of the Arab region, as well as east to Maldives and the Andamans.

Habitat & behaviour: The Cotton Pygmy-goose is usually seen in pairs or groups of pairs. They are found in small as well as large waterbodies with good aquatic vegetation, including irrigation tanks, village ponds, *jheels*, lakes, channels and lagoons. They are known to become tame and comfortable with human proximity in village tanks if they are left undisturbed. They forage among the emergent vegetation, and many pairs may be seen foraging near each other. They feed near the surface of the water, and the diet consists mainly of small fish, molluscs, crustaceans, insect larvae, as well as plant matter. Roosting and nesting is on trees near water. Flight is strong, with quick takeoffs without any running, before wheeling away in different directions. They can fly close to the water and are nimble enough to be able to avoid predators like falcons. Injured birds have been noted to hide by submerging themselves with only the head or bill out of the water. The call is a peculiar clucking, uttered in flight.

Nesting: The Cotton Pygmy-goose breeds between June and September in most of its range, and between January and March in Australia. The nest is a natural hollow in a tree trunk in or near water, and may be lined with grass, feathers or other soft material. The nest may be as high as five metres above the surface, and chicks leap off to follow their parents into water. The usual clutch consists of 6-12 ivory-white eggs.

* * *